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SOME EXPERIMENTAL DATA ON THE VALUE OF STUDYING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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The value of studying foreign languages, aside from the direct use of the modern languages, has been very much overestimated in some quarters and perhaps equally underestimated in other quarters. The controversy over the amounts of pure intellectual discipline of the various branches of instruction has been the warmest in the field of the languages, particularly the ancient ones. As a matter of fact, however, the controversy could be just as animated in the field of the sciences, when one recalls the distorted claims of discipline made for them in certain quarters.

This article will present some definite data on the amount of disciplinary or derived value of certain aspects of studying foreign languages. It is not claimed to present a complete measure of one or of all phases of such study, but it is certain that definite objective facts and measurements are far superior to individual opinions based on haphazard instances.

Scholastic records of students presenting different languages for college entrance.—The first problem considered was a comparison of the scholastic records of university students who had entered the university with two to four years of Latin with the records of those who had entered with two to four years of German. The average grade for the four years of college work of each of the graduates of the College of Letters and Science of the year 1910 was computed. The median mark of the 104 students who had entered the university with Latin was 85.7 and the median mark of the 45 students who had entered with German was 84.0. Hence the difference between the two groups is only 1.7 points.

The explanation for this small advantage of Latin over German may be sought in three directions: First, the disciplinary difference between Latin and German is either zero or very small. Second,

whatever difference they may have produced originally may have tended to disappear in the four years of college work, owing to the freedom of electives, pursuit of different courses, disciplinary effect of other studies, etc. Third, the small difference in scholastic records may be due to an original difference in the students themselves, owing to the possibility that one language may attract a better class of pupils than another. It seems very probable that if any real difference exists it is due chiefly to the third reason.

To determine what part, if any, the first two factors played, the average grade of each of the 738 Freshmen of the year 1909-10 was computed. The median grade of the 416 Freshmen who had entered with Latin was 82.4 and that of the 322 Freshmen who had entered with German was 81.0. Hence the difference between the two groups was only 1.4 points, or approximately the same as that for the graduates.

The next problem was to compare the grades of these two groups in specific subjects as follows:

Median grade in modern languages of 362 Freshmen who had entered with Latin	84.5
Median grade in modern languages of 293 Freshmen who had entered with German	82.3
Difference in favor of the Latin group	2.2
Median grade in Freshman English of 54 students who had entered with Latin only	83.9
Median grade in Freshman English of 97 students who had entered with German only	82.7
Difference in favor of the Latin group	1.2
Median grade in first-year French of 27 Freshmen who had entered with Latin only	81.5
Median grade in first-year French of 34 Freshmen who had entered with German only	82.0
Difference in favor of the German group	0.5

The differences again are very small. The claim of language teachers, so commonly made, that beginners in French who have had Latin are much superior to those who have not had Latin, or that students in English with previous training in Latin are superior to those without such training is ill founded. It is another example,

so common in educational thinking, of generalizing from striking, isolated cases. What differences do exist are due primarily to the selection of students. The pupils who entered the university with Latin were on the average better, but only slightly better, pupils before they studied Latin than those who undertook German. The traditions in many high schools have been such that somewhat better pupils have tended to select Latin.

Another tabulation (Table I) was made to show the scholarship records of Freshmen in relation to the amount of foreign languages studied, irrespective of what the languages were.

TABLE I

Years of Foreign Languages	Number of Students	Median Grade in All Freshman Studies
0.....	25	81.8
1-2.....	224	81.9
3-4.....	195	83.05
5-6.....	155	84.0

Effect of studying Latin upon the size of one's English vocabulary.—

The next problem was to measure the extent to which a pupil's English vocabulary is increased through the study of Latin. The method employed for determining the size of a person's English vocabulary has been described elsewhere and hence will not be discussed here.¹ Suffice it to say that the method employed measures the percentage of the entire English vocabulary, as well as the approximate absolute number of words whose meaning a given person knows sufficiently well to use them correctly. The test was made with 189 university students and with 46 Juniors in the Madison High School.

	Per cent
Size of English vocabulary of 139 university students who had studied Latin.....	60.9
Size of English vocabulary of 50 university students who had not studied Latin.....	58.2
Size of English vocabulary of 14 high-school Juniors who had studied Latin.....	54.7
Size of English vocabulary of 32 high-school Juniors who had not studied Latin.....	50.2

¹ D. Starch, *Educational Measurements* (in press). Macmillan.

The differences between the Latin and the no-Latin groups are surprisingly small. One of the reasons commonly urged for the study of Latin is its tendency to increase the student's English vocabulary. The difficulty in the situation lies in the fact that, while many English words are derived from Latin sources, the meanings of the English words are often so warped or distantly derived that it is necessary to learn the specific meanings. Simply to recognize that "boaconstrictor" contains the root *constringere*, "to draw together," will not teach a pupil that it means a certain kind of reptile. So far as the root-meaning is concerned, the word might have been applied to scores of things that contract. This point was brought out forcibly by the students on whom the test was made. The Latin students recognized in many instances the presence of Latin roots in the English words used in the test, but they could not be sure of the specific meanings without having definitely ascertained them. In many instances they would ascribe, by inference from the root-words, entirely erroneous meanings. Nevertheless the study of Latin does produce an appreciably larger English vocabulary. This advantage becomes less in university students, with whom it is partly counterbalanced by the increase in vocabulary due to wider experience.

Effect of studying foreign languages upon knowledge of English grammar and upon correctness of usage of English.—The final problem was to ascertain to what extent the study of foreign languages increases a pupil's knowledge of English grammar and to what extent, if at all, it increases correct use of the English language. The methods by which correctness of usage and technical knowledge of grammar were measured have been described elsewhere.¹ In brief, the test for usage consisted of a set of one hundred sentences, each of which was stated in two ways. The task of the pupil consisted in indicating the correct forms. Technical knowledge of grammar was measured by certain tests involving the designation of parts of speech, cases, tenses, and modes. These tests were made upon 54 university Juniors and Seniors and 146 high-school pupils. They gave the results shown in Table II, in which the scores for knowledge of grammar are the numbers of the parts of speech,

¹ *The Measurement of Ability in Reading, Writing, Spelling and English.* The College Book Store, Madison, Wisconsin.

cases, tenses, and modes indicated correctly in a specified period of time, and the scores for correctness of usage are the numbers of sentences designated correctly in a specified period of time.

TABLE II

Years of Foreign Languages	Number of Students	Average Scores for Knowledge of Grammar	Average Scores for Correctness of Usage
UNIVERSITY JUNIORS AND SENIORS			
0.....	2	48.0	81.5
2-5.....	12	47.8	71.1
6-9.....	25	58.6	75.5
10-15.....	15	63.4	75.7
HIGH-SCHOOL PUPILS			
0.....	12	14.7	32.2
8 weeks.....	50	20.8	43.0
1 year.....	18	25.5	43.4
2 years.....	39	24.8	45.9
3 years.....	27	28.6	47.7
UNIVERSITY JUNIORS AND SENIORS			
Years of Latin			
0.....	15	45.8	70.9
1-3.....	11	56.1	75.7
4.....	14	57.5	74.3
5 or more.....	9	61.8	76.1

Another test for correctness of usage, consisting of sentences like the set of one hundred, but arranged in the order of increasingly difficult steps, was made on another group of 146 university students and 92 high-school pupils. This test yielded the results given in Table III. The scores are the numbers of the highest steps passed. The higher the score is, the greater is the ability of using English correctly.

These tables agree in showing one very significant result, namely, that *the study of foreign languages materially increases a pupil's knowledge of English grammar but only slightly increases his ability in the correct usage of the English language*. Notice, for example, the upper part of Table II. The students who had 10 to 15 years of foreign languages made a score in grammatical knowledge of 63.

as compared with a score of 47.8 made by the students who had 2 to 5 years of foreign languages, a difference of 32.6 per cent in favor of the former group. For correctness of usage, the corresponding difference is only 6.4 per cent. The two students with no foreign languages made high scores because they were exceptionally good students, but they are too few in number to be considered. The high-school pupils show a gain in grammatical knowledge of 37.5 per cent from the 8-week group to the 3-year group and a gain in usage of only 10.9 per cent. The 12 pupils with no foreign language made low scores because they were exceptionally poor pupils. This is indicated by their low scholarship records, by the fact that

TABLE III

Years of Latin	Number of Pupils	Average Scores
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS		
0.....	47	10.1
1-6.....	99	10.2
HIGH-SCHOOL PUPILS		
0.....	78	9.0
1-4.....	14	9.3

many were over-age, by the fact that they avoided the foreign languages, and also by the large difference between their scores and those of the 50 pupils who were just beginning foreign languages. Eight weeks of foreign languages could hardly have produced such a big gain. Their higher scores must be due to a difference in original nature. The same facts are brought out by the comparison for Latin alone. The gain of the 5-or-more-year group over the 0-year group in grammatical knowledge is 34.9 per cent and in correct usage only 7.3 per cent. Latin obviously has no advantage over any other foreign language in increasing grammatical knowledge or usage of English.

Incidentally the implication may also be pointed out that knowledge of grammar has very little effect upon correct usage. The large increases in grammatical knowledge are accompanied by only very small increases in correct usage. Correct usage is primarily a matter of establishing correct habits of speech, and grammatical

knowledge is useful only in so far as it helps to establish such habits. Apparently imitation and repetition of correct expression are far more efficacious in forming correct habits than grammatical knowledge. The recent tendency to reduce the time devoted to formal grammar and to postpone the study of it to later years is in accord with these findings.

The argument often advanced for the study of foreign languages, and particularly for Latin, that they are a great aid in the use and comprehension of English is unfounded. Arguments of this kind are unnecessary. Why should we not study Latin on its own account as a language and as a guide to a literature of its own? Its aid, as well as that of any other foreign language, in facilitating the use of English is very small. Why not recognize this as a fact? If you wish to know English, study English, but not via Latin or some other language. If you wish to know Latin, study Latin for its own sake primarily, an end sufficiently worthy in itself. The aid of one language in the study of another is only incidental and unimportant, at least so far as present methods of teaching foreign languages go. The figures presented should not be interpreted as an argument against foreign languages or particularly against Latin, but rather against certain assumed disciplinary, transferred, or derived benefits.

Summary.—The scholastic records of students in the university entering with Latin are only to a slight and negligible extent better than those of students entering with German. Likewise, the scholastic records in modern languages, either beginning or advanced, or in English, of students entering with Latin are only to a very slight extent better than those of students entering with German. This slight difference is probably due to an inherent difference in the students rather than to a difference produced by these languages.

The English vocabulary of pupils who had studied Latin was 2.7 per cent larger than the vocabulary of those who had not studied Latin in the case of university students, and 4.5 per cent larger in the case of high-school pupils.

The study of foreign languages materially increases a student's knowledge of English grammar, but only slightly increases his ability to use English correctly.